

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time: The Church, the Vehicle of Mercy

I want to begin today by speaking about Fr. Avery Cardinal Dulles. First of all, you are probably familiar with the name Dulles, as in Dulles International Airport in Washington, DC. The airport was named after Cardinal Dulles' father, John Foster Dulles, the Secretary of State in the 1950's under President Dwight D. Eisenhower. He promoted the US involvement in NATO to fight the threat of communism in Europe and founded SEATO, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization to fight communism in Southeast Asia. Although the Dulles family had a long history of public service, particularly as secretaries of state, Avery Dulles' life took a different path. He was raised a Presbyterian, but then turned agnostic. He attended Harvard University when on day he went for a walk along the Charles River. He saw a beautiful flowering tree and as he stared at it he sensed a profound presence of God. He decided to search for a way to come closer to God, and became a Roman Catholic. After serving in the Navy in World War II, he entered the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits, where he was ordained a priest and sent for further studies. He was a great scholar particularly of Ecclesiology, the study of the Church. He was an advisor to the Vatican and to the American bishops. He was also a deeply spiritual man. In 2001, Pope St. John Paul II named him to the college of cardinals. He passed away in 2008.

Now, here is where I get to name drop. During the 80's and 90's I used to attend a special summer institute for priests run by Seton Hall University called the International Institute for Clergy Formation. The Institute attracted some of the greatest scholars in the Catholic Church, including Avery Dulles. The priests could attend one to seven weeks. There were five classperiods a day, and three or four scholars each period. We had the ability to choose freely. I always picked a week that Avery Dulles was there so I could attend his lectures. Sometimes he seemed boring, but he wasn't there to entertain. He was there to help us parish priests take our understanding of the faith and our teaching to new levels. He actually knew my name, which I hope was a good thing and not due to my snoring during his lectures. Anyway, I and many of the other priests often thanked him for his book, *Models of the Church*. He told us that he wrote a whole lot of other things too, actually twenty-five books and all sorts of articles and essays, but we would tell him that *Models of the Church* was so easy for our people to follow including, and especially, those who were coming into the Church.

In this book Cardinal Dulles presented models or modes of understanding the Church. He explains that the Church cannot be defined by any one model, but by all models seen together. He presents five models, but notes that there are many other models he could also have explained. The five models he presents begin with the Church as an Institution. This considers the importance of Church structure, the hierarchy, bishops, priests and deacons, and the Church's magisterium or teaching authority. The Church seen as institution is responsible for the unity of what Catholics believe and how they live throughout the world. From the Vatican to the Dioceses to the parishes, the Church has a hierarchical structure. Sadly, some of the people making up this structure failed us all as the clergy sex abuse scandal revealed.

Focusing on only the aspect of the Church as institution would end up ignoring the Church as the People of God, Dulles second model. Here we understand the vital role of the laity. At St. Ignatius, as in most Catholic parishes, Faith Formation, Youth Ministry, Evangelization, our Food Pantry, our Pregnancy Center, our Caritas outreach to the homebound and hospitalized, our Early Childhood Center, Guardian Angels School, and just about every ministry is led by lay people.

But the Church is not just institution and ministries led by the laity, it is a place of the profound prayer. The Church is where Jesus united to his people in the sacraments. This mode or model considers the worship of the Church, the liturgy.

A fourth model flows from the directive of the Lord to go out into the world and proclaim the Gospel.” This would be Church as herald of the Gospel, its evangelical, missionary work. Our Masses end with the call to go out and bring the Lord to the world.

Dulles’ final model is Church as Servant, caring for the presence of Christ in those who reach out for help. The Catholic Church is the most charitable organization in the world. The jewel of the Church in the United States is Catholic Relief Services, the most effective charity in our country.

At the conclusion of his work, Cardinal Dulles emphasizes that the Church is not just one of these models but all of the models he presented united together as well as many, many more models.

It is in this light that I would like to consider today’s Gospel as the Church of Mercy. Chapter 18 of the *Gospel of Matthew* is often called the Dissertation on the Church. In the section we have in today’s Gospel, Jesus instructs his disciples on how to care for those who turn from Him, turn from the Church. “If your brother sins against you....tell him, just the two of you. If that doesn’t work, visit him with two or three other witnesses. If that still doesn’t work have the Church contact him. If he still refuses to change then the Church should consider him an outsider.

These steps really have to do with Mercy. The person who approaches the brother who has sinned is basically saying, “Look, you have gone in the wrong direction. I know you. I know this is not you. You are better than that.” The person is being offered forgiveness and mercy by the one he has offended and, by extension, by the Church. If the person continues to offend or is obstinate in holding on to his sin, then two or three should approach the fellow saying, “We miss you, you belong with us. We need you to be with us. Turn from your ways and know that the mercy of God is there for you.” If the person remains obstinate, then perhaps a representative of the entire Church, a deacon, priest or bishop, might help the person understand why his actions are offensive. “This is who we are. This is who you are becoming. You are leaving us. Do not do that. Please.” If the person still refuses to receive the mercy and forgiveness of the Church, he would no longer be part of the Church. Still the mercy of God is always available for him in the Church.

Every Mass we pray that those who have been away from the Church may come back home. We are not just praying for those who no longer attend Mass. We are mainly praying that all those who have turned away from God might come home and receive mercy. We always pray for the conversion of sinners, beginning, of course, with ourselves.

“Whoever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven. Whoever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” When the Church binds someone to itself, that person is part of the earthly Church and the heavenly Church. When the Church recognizes that someone is no longer part of the Saved Community on earth, then that person is no longer part of the Saved Community in heaven. But mercy is always there for that person. The Church is the Fountain of Mercy. So we pray, “Please come home.”

There are many models, modes of understanding the one Church. The Church is institution, people, sacraments, evangelizers, servants, and fountain of mercy. It is not just one of these. It is all of these and much more. Most importantly, the Church is the place that celebrates the presence of our Lord and Savior, for “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”

Today’s Gospel, *Matthew 18*, tells us that we are not merely members of an organization. The Church is far more than that. The Church is the Body of Christ. And we are the Church.